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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes a 1990 Scottish study exploring the views of parents, professionals, and voluntary organizations concerning services for children with specific learning difficulties (SLD). It specifically addressed the questions of: (1) to what degree pupils with SLD are a group with distinctive difficulties and needs; (2) how learning difficulties can be identified; and (3) how the difficulties can be remedied. Questionnaires, interviews, and literature analyses were used. Findings of the study are discussed concerning the following: three views on SLD, assessment and services for SLD, concerns of parents, concerns of learning support teachers, concerns of student teachers, and implications of the findings for different groups. Findings provided evidence of tension among the different groups involved due to uncertainty about causes and incidence, debates about effective assessment and services, and competition for scarce resources. Also noted are tensions between certain national policies. Provision of a full spectrum of services is recommended. (DB)

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INTERCHANGE

No 18

Specific Learning Difficulties: Policy, Practice and Provision

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Specific Learning Difficulties: Policy, Practice and Provision

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Over the past two decades, there have been many changes in policy and provision for children with special educational needs. In the area of specific learning difficulties (often called 'dyslexia'), there are debates on a number of issues. What are specific learning difficulties and how can they be recognised? Are they qualitatively different from other learning difficulties? Do children require different teaching materials, teaching methods and forms of classroom organisation? What happens when parents and teachers disagree about the nature of the problem and appropriate provision? In 1990, Stirling University's Department of Education was commissioned by the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED) to explore the views of parents, professionals and voluntary organisations and gather examples which illustrated provision by both education and health services.

Background

What are specific learning difficulties?

Many psychologists and teachers commented on children whose difficulties are puzzling, and who do not respond to ordinary learning support teaching.

Do children have difficulties in learning which differ in kind, or only in degree?

There is general agreement that a child may be said to experience specific learning difficulties when there is a significant gap between attainment in a particular area of the curriculum and performance in general. Some people (who may use the term 'dyslexia') argue that specific learning difficulties are constitutional in origin and therefore different from global learning difficulties. Others maintain that the causes of difficulties are similar, with specific learning difficulties seen as a delay in development. There are disagreements over how wide the discrepancy between performance in general and attainment in a particular area has to be before it is termed a specific learning difficulty, and whether specific learning difficulties occur only in some areas (such as literacy or numeracy) or in any area (for example, gymnastics, modern languages).

The policy background

Two reports have been highly influential in shaping policy for children with learning difficulties. The Warnock report (1978)

argued that medical categories of handicap and sharp dividing lines between those with learning difficulties and others should be abandoned (as many as 20% of children might experience some form of learning difficulty) and that there should be closer parental involvement in decisions about assessment of needs and provision of education. In Warnock's view, the educators needed to adapt the school environment to meet children's needs. A report from the school inspectorate in Scotland (SOED, 1978), on children with learning difficulties in mainstream schools, argued that many learning difficulties could be attributed not to intrinsic problems in the child, but to inappropriate curricula and teaching methods. Withdrawing children from mainstream classes for special teaching was, therefore, in many cases seen as misconceived. The children would benefit from having learning support teachers teaching co-operatively with the class or subject teacher, but with the class teacher bearing the ultimate responsibility.

Policies on learning difficulties have moved away from assuming that the child is the source of the problem. The focus is now mainly on the curriculum and teaching methods.

What are the benefits of the move away from a 'child deficit' approach? What are the disadvantages?

The research project

The project addressed the following central questions:

- To what extent are pupils with specific learning difficulties recognised as a group with distinctive needs and how are their difficulties perceived?
- Where specific learning difficulties are recognised, how are they identified?
- How are the needs of these pupils met and their identified difficulties remedied?

Questionnaires, interviews and literature analysis were used to explore a variety of views, including those of voluntary organisations, parents, education authority personnel, learning support teachers, teacher educators, pre-service teachers, medical officers and the Scottish Examination Board. In addition, examples of particular forms of provision were investigated. Two samples of parents were surveyed: one provided by some local authorities and one by voluntary associations. The former contained a higher proportion of working class parents; the latter of middle class parents using the private sector.

Three views on specific learning difficulties

The researchers first needed to identify a shared working definition that was acceptable to the various people included in this survey. The research found a substantial agreement that some children did worse in certain areas of the curriculum than their general levels of achievement would suggest. Where specific learning difficulties did exist, those in literacy were regarded as the most important. Despite this general agreement, there were three distinct ways in which people viewed specific learning difficulties, with considerable overlap between these different perspectives.

One view was that children with specific learning difficulties had problems of a different type than those with more global learning difficulties. Many groups — particularly, the voluntary organisations, parents and the Scottish Examination Board — preferred to use the term 'dyslexia', suggesting a learning difficulty which is constitutional in origin. A minority of those in other groups surveyed — medical officers, education authority personnel, teacher educators and learning support teachers — also felt that children with specific learning difficulties are essentially different from others with learning difficulties.

Another view was that specific learning difficulties fall within the spectrum of learning difficulties, ranging from specific to global and from mild to severe. Children within this grouping have some common and some differing characteristics and a firm cut-off point between specific and global difficulties cannot be drawn. A majority of people in education authorities, learning support teachers, teacher educators and pre-service teachers held this view.

A third view was that even though some children have different abilities in certain areas of the curriculum, it is not helpful to group them under the umbrella term 'specific learning difficulties'. Rather than categorising children according to the nature of their learning difficulty or disability, teachers should focus on meeting the needs of children through modifying the curriculum. This position was advocated by some of those in education authorities and some learning support teachers.

Assessment and provision for specific learning difficulties

These different concepts of specific learning difficulties led to different views on assessment and provision among the people surveyed. Those who thought that specific learning difficulties were different from global learning difficulties advocated the use of tests, including IQ tests, to diagnose the precise nature of the problem and individual tuition using specialist materials to help the child overcome his or her difficulties. Those who saw specific learning difficulties as part of a spectrum of difficulties, recommended a range of assessment techniques including use of a variety of tests, observation and trying out particular teaching strategies. While some specialised tuition might be suitable, most teaching should be within the mainstream class with the emphasis on using the mainstream curriculum. Those who opposed categorising children emphasised that assessment should describe children's needs rather than their deficits and should be carried out through observation within the mainstream class. The goals of the curriculum and methods of teaching should be broadly similar for all children and the principal responsibility for meeting the needs of children with learning difficulties lay with the subject or class teacher, assisted by the learning support teacher.

There was general agreement that most children with specific learning difficulties were currently educated in the mainstream class with some withdrawal for individual tuition. The resources of the research project did not allow this form of provision to be studied, although the survey of parents showed that in general they felt that the amount and nature of individual tuition was inadequate. However, the research did provide some examples of specialised tuition in a number of education authorities. These included two reading centres, a dyslexia unit attached to an independent school and a unit within an occupational therapy department of a hospital. Parents were generally very satisfied with such forms of provision, which they saw as tailored to their child's needs. However, with the exception of the occupational therapy unit, specialised provision tended to focus on boys and on middle class children.

Some schools, especially in less well-off areas, never referred children to their local reading centres, or made use of special arrangements with the Scottish Examination Board.

How can equitable use of special facilities be ensured?

Interchange will now look at the views of the key groups of people concerned with specific learning difficulties.

Concerns of parents

Parents favoured the use of the term 'dyslexia' rather than 'specific learning difficulties'; some felt that the term specific learning difficulties was used by education authorities in order to avoid having to make special provisions. Many maintained a firm distinction between different types of learning difficulties; they felt a stigma was attached to global learning difficulties, but not to specific learning difficulties.

Parents felt that teachers should be more alert to the early signs of learning difficulties and should take prompt action to arrange an assessment. Many believed their child received insufficient individual tuition, that teachers lacked knowledge of specialised teaching methods and that they were not given clear enough explanations of the child's difficulties and the action to be taken.

Parents were frustrated when worries about a child were dismissed. Some teachers suggested that teachers may feel slighted when a child fails to make progress.

How can communication between schools and parents be improved?

Schools seemed to be too ready to label parents who expressed concern about their child's progress as fussy and neurotic. Many parents had been in contact with voluntary organisations and found them helpful in providing information about specific learning difficulties and contacts with psychologists and tutors. There was some evidence that parents were increasingly becoming aware of their rights and willing to use the legislation to secure the provision they felt their child required.

Middle class parents tended to be more dissatisfied with assessment and educational provision than working class parents.

Concerns of learning support teachers

The term 'specific learning difficulties' was accepted by most learning support teachers and two thirds used the term 'dyslexia' on some occasions. 'Dyslexia' was felt to be more precise in meaning

and to refer to problems in deciphering written symbols. More experienced teachers were more likely to use the term dyslexia, and were more confident about helping children with specific learning difficulties.

Collaboration between learning support teachers and class and subject teachers was more effective in primary than in secondary schools.

How can class and subject teachers best be supported in taking responsibility for children's learning across the whole range of attainments? What are the best ways of developing teamwork in the classroom?

In primary schools, learning support teachers reported collaborating with colleagues to identify children with specific learning difficulties, whereas in secondary schools, learning support teachers saw themselves as having sole responsibility. Perhaps because of their greater collaboration, learning support teachers in primary schools were more aware of, and confident about, using systematic procedures for identifying problems than were their secondary school colleagues.

Learning support teachers reported that the most useful provision for children with specific learning difficulties was in the mainstream class with withdrawal for individual tuition. Withdrawing children was more common in primary than secondary schools and more primary than secondary teachers considered this the most important aspect of the learning support teacher's role. In the secondary schools sector, there was more concern that if children were taken out of classes, they would lose touch with the mainstream curriculum. Learning difficulties at this stage were seen as more difficult to remedy. Co-operative teaching and consultancy were seen by learning support teachers as their most important role.

Most learning support teachers said that they had teaching materials which were suitable for children with specific learning difficulties. The materials were generally regarded as appropriate for all children with learning difficulties, including those with more global learning difficulties. The teachers believed they needed more training in specific learning difficulties (only a third held the DipSEN). Some with the DipSEN felt that insufficient time had been spent on specific learning difficulties.

Learning support teachers were unsure about the emphasis to be given to individual tuition, now that co-operative teaching and consultancy were regarded as the main roles of learning support teachers.

What is the place of tuition withdrawn from the class in the repertoire of learning support strategies?

On the whole, it was felt that too many demands were made of teachers in view of the limited resources and the wide range of special educational needs. Where the needs of all children could not be met, teachers selected what they saw as the most urgent tasks. Their priorities differed markedly from one to another.

Concerns of student teachers

Most pre-service teachers were aware of coverage of general learning difficulties in their courses, and knew about the collaborative role of the learning support teacher. The majority knew of specific learning difficulties in a superficial way. The most significant knowledge in this respect was of patterns of referral for more specialised help.

Three quarters of student primary teachers considered that they were insufficiently prepared by their courses to tackle the practical

teaching of reading. The researchers were not in a position to investigate this further. However, it inhibits the earlier identification of specific learning difficulties that is advocated by learning support teachers and advisers, parents and psychologists.

Implications of the findings for different groups

Voluntary organisations and parents

- It was evident that relationships between teachers and parents were often far from harmonious. Part of the onus for improvement lies with the educational professionals, but parents also need to make clear their wish to know how their child is being educated and how they can assist in this process.
- Voluntary organisations and parents are concerned about the particular group of children or the individual child whose interests they are representing. Exerting pressure for better provision, perhaps using the legislative framework, is an option for parents and one that is likely to increase. However, parents and voluntary organisations need to be aware that education authorities are responsible for the education of all children and have to ensure an equitable distribution of resources.

Paired reading schemes and parental involvement in homework were felt to be effective in several places where they were based on clear procedures.

How can parents be supported in helping a child to make progress in learning, especially where the child has specific learning difficulties?

Education authority personnel

- Education authority personnel have a responsibility to state clearly their policy on specific learning difficulties and take part in on-going discussions with teachers, parents and voluntary organisations.
- Given the present uncertainty about the best way of educating children with specific learning difficulties, education authorities need to evaluate the effectiveness of different forms of provision and give guidance to schools and psychological services.
- Education authorities need to check that access to special provision, such as reading centres, is equitable and does not favour particular groups, such as boys or middle class children.

Learning support teachers

- The balance between the different roles of learning support teachers requires particular consideration by management teams in schools. Given the wide-ranging nature of their work and the needs of individual children, they must draw up priorities in collaboration with the special needs adviser and communicate these to parents and the mainstream/class teacher.
- Initially, learning support teachers have to develop a clear idea of future educational programmes for children with specific learning difficulties; and to proceed to effective strategies for planning, implementing and monitoring these.
- Learning support teachers should be attentive to parents' anxieties and be willing to discuss possible forms of assessment

and provision. One suggestion is the development of the formal parents' evening consultation into a parent/teacher conference, in which the child's progress is discussed and goals are set by both parent and teacher. They should endeavour to enlist the help and support of parents, who can be valuable partners in the education of their children.

Satisfaction with provision was usually seen by parents, teachers and psychologist in terms of children's confidence and self-esteem.

- Participation in in-service training will be of value to less experienced learning support teachers in developing knowledge and skills with regard to specific learning difficulties.

How can the effectiveness of provision for children with specific learning difficulties best be evaluated?

Class/subject teachers

- Effective liaison with the learning support teacher should aim to develop shared understandings of specific learning difficulties, agreed procedures and clear communication with parents.
- Sympathetic treatment of, and readiness to respond to, parents who express concern about their child's progress are important.
- In-service training may help class and subject teachers to understand children's particular problems and therefore make appropriate judgements about how a child's learning difficulties may be remedied or circumvented.

Teacher educators

- It is doubtful whether teacher educators can provide student teachers with more than a broad overview of learning difficulties. A more in-depth approach is appropriate for in-service training.
- At both pre-service and in-service stages teachers should be encouraged to become more critical and reflective, and be made aware of the range of theories and prescriptions for practice which exist.
- A greater emphasis on practical approaches to the teaching of reading would reflect its fundamental importance and might prepare primary class teachers to identify and tackle difficulties at an earlier stage, by their own practices and by referral.
- In-service training focusing upon specific learning difficulties is appropriate for class and subject teachers as well as for learning support teachers.

Student teachers were confident about theoretical knowledge and children's reading, but doubtful about their own practical skills.

How might student teachers be helped to put theory on learning to read into practice?

Conclusions

The study provided much evidence of tension between the different groups involved in specific learning difficulties, owing to uncertainty about fundamental causes and incidence, debates about effective assessment and provision, and competition for scarce resources. Parents were motivated by concern for their own child, while education authorities and teachers were obliged to balance the needs of individuals against those of the wider group. This created disagreements over priorities.

In addition, there have been tensions between certain national policies. An increased emphasis on the role of parents as consumers has tended to encourage parents to press for the provision they favour — in this case individual tuition by withdrawal from the class, or specialised facilities such as reading centres. This conflicts, however, with the move over recent years for most children with learning difficulties to be taught within the mainstream class, the curriculum being scrutinised for sources of difficulty and the class teacher taking responsibility for children across the range of attainments.

Renewed emphasis on a range of provision to address a range of needs might help to resolve such tensions. It should be stressed that the Warnock report acknowledged that specific learning difficulties were unlikely to be overcome simply by revising the curriculum. Further development of the consultative role of the learning support teacher should result in enhanced skills for mainstream teachers in identifying varieties of learning difficulty. The class teacher and learning support teacher might then be able support children in everyday classes, as well as be able to draw on a range of alternative strategies.

Resource constraints at the current time may make this a somewhat over-optimistic aim. Nevertheless, clear communication between local authorities, schools and parents, and efforts to understand each other's views, would be a constructive start towards improving the provision for children with specific learning difficulties.

Full report of the project

The full report *Specific Learning Difficulties: Policy, Practice and Provision*, can be obtained from the Department of Education, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA. Price £12.00 including postage. The report of a parallel research project supported by Tayside Region, *Specific Learning Difficulties in Mathematics* (Weedon C), can be obtained from the same address. Price £4.00 including postage.

References and further reading

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Scottish Office Education Department who funded the study.

Notes

Type of learning difficulty

Policy on learning difficulties

Equitable use of special facilities

Communication between schools and parents

Collaboration between class and learning support teachers

Tuition withdrawn from the class

Support for parents

Evaluating effectiveness of provision

Helping student teachers

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